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Gaming Direct Democracy: How Voters' Views of Job Performance Interact with Elite Endorsements of Ballot Measures

Abstract: Voters are thought to rely on elite endorsements in helping them make decisions. Their ability to use these endorsements is especially important in direct democracy, since ballot measures are complex policy proposals that lack partisan cues printed on the ballot. Using an exit survey, we examine California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's endorsement of four Indian gaming measures on the ballot during the presidential primary election of 2008. We find that voters who had knowledge of the elite endorsement differed little from those who did not. We show, however, that Schwarzenegger's endorsement was conditionally related to support for the measures, depending on whether or not voters approved of Schwarzenegger's job performance as governor, with voters who approved of Schwarzenegger's job performance being more likely to vote in favor of the measures compared with voters who disapproved of his job performance. Our results confirm that it is not just the knowledge of a cue that matters, but also the voter's assessment of the endorser that influences the cue's effectiveness.

Keywords: cues; direct democracy; elite endorsements; Governor Schwarzenegger; initiative; referendum.

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1 Introduction

In presidential and congressional elections, there are strong theoretical arguments and empirical studies that suggest voters routinely use cues and heuristics as information shortcuts to help them make decisions that are consistent with their preferences. For direct democracy, however, assuming that voters use cues to make decisions on initiatives and referendums is troublesome: elite endorsements do not appear on the ballot next to initiatives and referendums in the way that party labels are often included next to the names of political candidates.

There is limited empirical support suggesting that endorsements help voters make decisions on ballot measures. On one hand, scholars have shown that voters can use elite endorsements to approximate a fully informed vote. On the other, new research questions the assumption that voters' use of elite endorsements is commonplace. If widespread usage of elite endorsements is essential for voters to make reasoned choices on initiatives and referendums – which is the implicit assumption of much of the scholarship on voters in direct democracy – we need to understand when and how often voters use cues when making decisions in direct democracy.

We provide new evidence to assess how often and to what extent voters use elite endorsements to make decisions on ballot measures. Using an election survey from California's presidential primary in February 2008, we evaluate the effectiveness of then-Governor Schwarzenegger's endorsement of four veto (also called "popular") referendums on the ballot. Our results suggest that voters who were aware of the cue used the endorsement conditionally. That is, voters used the cue to guide their decisions based on whether they approved or disapproved of Governor Schwarzenegger's performance in office. In particular, voters who had a positive view of the governor and knew his endorsement were more likely to support the referendums; the opposite was true for voters who disapproved of his job performance and knew his endorsement. Our results add to the literature on elite endorsements, showing that governors can be persuasive cue-givers.

2 Background

The earliest research on voting behavior and opinion formation paints an unflattering picture of the American voter (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). Such findings question the ability of the average voter to make reasoned democratic decisions, a fear that additional research has supported by highlighting the limited nature of political knowledge among the electorate (for a summary, see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

As Lupia (2006) argues, however, academic elitism has clouded our thinking about what we should expect voters to know about politics. Political facts, while they can help voters make more informed and perhaps better decisions (e.g., Bartels 1996), may not be critical for democratic decision-making. Voters require "operative knowledge" that is relevant to the decision at hand (e.g., Lupia 2006; Johnson 2009). Indeed, Downs (1957) argues that – as long as political parties offer a relatively stable set of policy positions in their platforms – ideology and party labels can act as cheap and easy information shortcuts.

Other research confirms that voters can rely on knowledgeable and trustworthy sources of information as a substitute for extensive knowledge to make an informed decision (e.g., Lupia 1994; Popkin 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Druckman 2001; Druckman et al. 2009, 2010).

Lupia's (1994) seminal article sets the baseline for scholarly understanding of how voters use information shortcuts in direct democracy. Surveying voters about five initiatives in California's 1988 general election, Lupia shows that individuals who were aware of key elite endorsements made decisions that were similar to voters who had extensive "encyclopedic" knowledge of the measures. Based on Lupia's empirical evidence, the conventional wisdom in political science has become that voters routinely use information shortcuts to make political decisions (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004).

Assuming that voters often use cues to make decisions in all types of elections is problematic. Indeed, voters use party labels extensively in national candidate elections, where voters select candidates that represent their own partisan attachment more than 90% of the time. Moreover, party labels are extraordinarily accessible cues for voters to use *as they are on the ballot itself*. By contrast, cues are not available on the ballot for initiatives and referendums. Yet, both Lupia (1994) and Karp (1998) show that elite endorsements do help guide voter behavior on ballot measures. Recent empirical enquiries (Burnett et al. 2010; Burnett and Parry 2012), however, suggest voters' use of cues in direct democracy is not universal. In Burnett et al. (2010), they find that, after controlling for policy preference, voters who knew a cue did not vote differently than uninformed voters. In Burnett and Parry's (2012) experiments involving Arkansas residents, they show that a gubernatorial endorsement had only a modest – and sometimes nonexistent – effect on support for ballot measures.

In other words, the limited research on voter behavior in ballot measure elections produces conflicting results concerning voters' propensity to use endorsements. Furthermore, the ability of governors to provide a persuasive endorsement for voters in direct democracy elections remains an under-examined empirical question. Below, we begin to remedy this oversight while adding to the literature that assesses whether and how often voters use elite endorsements to arrive at a decision.

3 Hypothesis and Data

We base our research on work of Lupia (1994) and Lupia and McCubbins (1998) who argue that voters can learn from cue-givers when the voters perceive the cue-giver

to be trustworthy and knowledgeable. Specifically, we look to see if voting on ballot measures is related to awareness of an elite endorsement conditional on approval of the endorser (which we use as a proxy for his perceived trustworthiness). We assume that all voters considered the endorser – Governor Schwarzenegger – to be knowledgeable. We use data from an election survey we conducted during the California presidential primary on February 5, 2008. During this election, we had student volunteers ask San Diego voters exiting their polling places to answer questions about the election. We surveyed eight polling locations (which covered 10 precincts) across the city.¹ Our volunteers gathered 615 interviews and received 467 refusals for a cooperation rate of 56.8%. While estimating of the relationship between voting and the governor’s endorsement does not require random sampling so long as we have random assignment² across the two conditions (whether the voter recalled that Schwarzenegger supported the measures), to enhance our external validity, we decided to randomize our sample, instructing our volunteers to ask every other exiting voter for an interview. Our survey focused on, among

1 To ensure we drew a reasonable sample with our election survey, we compare the demographics for our sample to the 2005–2009 American Community Survey (ACS) demographics. In our sample, respondents are more educated and disproportionately Caucasian. The remaining demographics are similar to the 2005–2009 ACS demographics.

	Survey	2005–2009 ACS Data for San Diego
Age	Median between 36–45; 11.6%>65 years	Median age 33.6; 10.7%>65 years
Household income	Median between \$50–100,000	\$61,962
HS diploma (age>25)	99%	86.3%
College degree (age>25)	73.5%	40.6%
Female	50.2%	49.7%
Asian or Pacific Islander	5%	15.3%
Black	1.8%	6.8%
Latino	7%	27.3%
Caucasian	76.8%	66.7%

2 Unlike our previous research (Burnett and McCubbins 2012, 2013) we cannot match respondents across our treatment conditions because matching makes little sense when, as we note below, almost 90% of our sample received the treatment. Furthermore, we cannot construct in this instance a true test of Lupia and McCubbins’ theory because the limited number of questions we could ask and the votes on slot machines is non-ideological, the general information provided by the survey does not allow us to create a good estimate of assignment to the treatment or control group. These two confounds significantly limit the econometric tools we can use to analyze our data.

other things, Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97. All four measures authorized certain Native American gaming outfits to expand their operations. We provide the official voter guide's description of each measure in Appendix A.

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger endorsed all four propositions. Indeed, as governor, his stance in favor provided voters with a visible and valuable information shortcut for the propositions. On television advertisements, Governor Schwarzenegger hailed the legislation as a "historic bipartisan agreement" and urged voters to "vote yes for billions of dollars for California families."³ Governor Schwarzenegger provided an information shortcut that satisfied both of Lupia and McCubbins' (1998) conditions for persuasion (the endorser must be perceived to be knowledgeable and trustworthy). That is, many California voters shared a common interest with Governor Schwarzenegger (he had just won reelection by a margin of about 17 percentage points), and he was presumably knowledgeable about the state's budget.

We asked respondents three questions about the referendums and Governor Schwarzenegger. We asked these questions only once in our survey because the answers are the same for each measure. We asked the following questions (in order):

1. True or False: Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97 do not require complete adherence to the California Environmental Quality Act. (The correct answer is "true," coded as "1" for correct and "0" for incorrect and "do not know" responses.)
2. How many more slot machines would Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97 allow if they all succeed? 25,000; 17,000; 11,000; or 4000. (The correct answer is "17,000," coded as "1" for correct and "0" for incorrect and "do not know" responses.)
3. Do you know if Arnold Schwarzenegger supported, opposed or took no position on the Indian Gaming referendums (Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97)? (The correct answer is "supported," coded as "1" for correct, and "0" for incorrect and "do not know" responses.)

In addition to the three questions above, we asked respondents to report their assessment of how Arnold Schwarzenegger was handling his job as governor by indicating whether they approved (coded as "1") or disapproved (coded as "0") of his job performance. Similar to Karp (1998; see also Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989; Mondak 1993), we asked voters to evaluate Governor Schwarzenegger to add a "direction" to his endorsement. We expect that voters who approve of how

3 An archive of the video is available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueUMHseWauM>.

the governor was handling his job will view his endorsement positively, thereby encouraging those voters to support the measures. By contrast, voters who disapproved of how the governor was handling his job would be expected to view his endorsement negatively, leading them to vote against the measures. Finally, we also asked respondents to indicate how they voted on the four propositions in question, which serve as our dependent variables. We list all of the questions used in our regression in Appendix B.

We use logistic regression to estimate whether voters who both approved of Governor Schwarzenegger and knew of his endorsement were persuaded to vote for Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97. The treatment we are interested in is the interaction between approval for Schwarzenegger and awareness of Schwarzenegger's endorsement. Lupia and McCubbins' theory of persuasion and choice tells us that voters can only be persuaded by sources they perceive as informed and trustworthy. We assume that all voters consider the governor to be informed on the subject of statewide policy, and we assume that voters who approve of the governor's job performance would believe that they share a common interest with the governor, and thus would consider him a trustworthy informant. We exclude respondents who said they "did not know" whether they approved of the governor's performance from the analysis since we consider positive or negative approval of the governor's performance necessary for trust in his endorsement; that is, these individuals do not share a common interest with the governor. It is possible that respondents who disapproved of the governor's performance and were aware of the governor's endorsement were nonetheless persuaded by the endorsement, which in this case would lead them to be less likely to support the referendums he endorsed. Thus, we have one treatment variable, which is an interaction between a dichotomous variable that takes a value of one when voters approve of the governor and another dichotomous variable that takes a value of one when voters are aware of his endorsement.

The two dichotomous variables that jointly define the treatment just described, awareness of the endorsement and approval of Governor Schwarzenegger, we will refer to as *awareness* and *approval*. These two dichotomous variables enter into our estimation. In Lupia and McCubbins' theory, *awareness* of the endorsement is a necessary condition for persuasion. In other words, individuals must be aware of Governor Schwarzenegger's position in order to make use of his endorsement. The following two paragraphs describe our expectations for these variables in our model, given that the model also includes the interaction of the two.

The coefficient for the awareness variable, all else constant, can be interpreted as the interaction between awareness of the endorsement and *disapproval for Schwarzenegger*. Lupia and McCubbins (1994) show that individuals are sometimes persuaded against an action when they observe a positive signal

from a source they perceive to be opposed to their interests. We expect that *some* of those who did not express approval of Schwarzenegger's performance consider him to be opposed to their interests, and were thus persuaded by his endorsement, leading them to vote *against* the propositions; this occurs only to the extent that disapproval indicates a belief that their interests are not aligned with Schwarzenegger. For this reason, we expect a significant negative correlation between awareness of the endorsement and support for the propositions.

The approval variable, all else equal, represents the relationship between approval for Schwarzenegger and support for the propositions *among those respondents who were not aware of the governor's endorsement, and therefore were untreated*. We have no theory about likely support for the propositions among this group of respondents: on the one hand, perhaps voters who support the governor favor the same policies that he favors, even when they are unaware of his endorsement; on the other hand, perhaps conservative voters are both more likely to support the governor and more likely to oppose ballot measures. Although we do not have specific expectations for the coefficient on the approval variable, we consider it a likely confound that should be controlled for in the model.

In addition to the awareness and approval variables and their interaction (the latter representing our treatment of interest), we have a few additional control variables: two dichotomous measures of party identification (Democrat and Republican, with Independents as the excluded group), and two dichotomous indicators of knowledge about the propositions.

4 Results

We present the descriptive statistics regarding voter knowledge for Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97 in Table 1.⁴ We can draw two conclusions from Table 1. First, not surprisingly, our sample did not appear to know much about the specifics of these four referendums, as only 17.1% of the respondents knew that these referendums would allow for an additional 17,000 new slot machines. Moreover, only 30.6% knew that these referendums did not require full compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Second, our sample appeared to know, quite overwhelmingly, that Governor Schwarzenegger (the main cue-giver that took a position on these propositions) supported these referendums (with 87.6% answering our question correctly).

⁴ There is no variation across the four referendums for these questions because we only asked these questions once and the answer was the same for each measure.

Table 1: Knowledge About Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97.

	Correct	Incorrect	Do Not Know
Proposition 94–97 would approve 17,000 additional slot machines	17.1%	27.2%	55.6%
Proposition 94–97 included exemptions from CEQA	30.6%	19.4%	50.0%
Governor Schwarzenegger supported Propositions 94–97	87.6%	4.2%	8.2%

While voters could identify Governor Schwarzenegger’s position, does the relationship between their knowledge of the endorsement and how they feel about the endorser seem related to how they voted? Table 2 presents the regression results for all four referendums. Three interesting findings emerge from the regression analysis. First, each regression indicates that voters who both knew that Governor Schwarzenegger supported the measures and gave Governor Schwarzenegger a positive job approval were significantly more likely to vote for the measures. This represents resounding support for our primary hypothesis. Second, voters who knew the governor’s position and disapproved of his job

Table 2: Logit Results for Referendums to Authorize Additional Slot Machines.

	Prop. 94	Prop. 95	Prop. 96	Prop. 97
Approved of Governor’s performance	–0.57 (0.61)	–0.57 (0.61)	–0.68 (0.61)	–0.58 (0.61)
Knew endorsement	–1.20* (0.52)	–1.19* (0.52)	–1.15* (0.53)	–1.20* (0.52)
Approved of Gov. * Knew endorsement	1.85** (0.66)	1.87** (0.66)	1.83** (0.66)	1.95** (0.66)
R knows exceptions to CEQA	–0.54* (0.23)	–0.56* (0.23)	–0.64** (0.23)	–0.56* (0.24)
R knows number of increased slots	0.26 (0.29)	0.23 (0.29)	0.21 (0.28)	0.18 (0.29)
Democrat	–0.15 (0.37)	–0.14 (0.37)	–0.08 (0.36)	–0.11 (0.37)
Republican	–0.11 (0.39)	–0.08 (0.39)	–0.13 (0.38)	0.01 (0.39)
Constant	0.92 (0.59)	0.91 (0.59)	0.89 (0.59)	0.88 (0.59)
Pseudo- <i>R</i> ²	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.08
N	408	407	407	405

Logit regression of vote choice (0=vote against Proposition, 1=vote for Proposition). Standard errors are in parentheses. Excluded category: voters who disapproved of the governor’s job performance. **p*<0.05, ***p*<0.01.

performance were significantly less likely to support the measures. This, too, suggests that endorsements are persuasive (in this case, convincing voters to oppose a policy endorsed by a source perceived as opposed to their interests). Third, respondents who were aware that the referendums provided exceptions from CEQA were significantly less likely to report that they voted for the measures. These voters may have learned about the CEQA exemptions by being informed individuals (e.g., they read the voter information guide carefully) or they could have learned this fact from a third-party (e.g., The Sierra Club).

Overall, Table 2 shows that voters' use of Governor Schwarzenegger's endorsement was conditional on their evaluation of his job performance in precisely the way that Lupia and McCubbins (1994, 1998) predict. The table also demonstrates that the value of his endorsement was independent of voters' perceptions of his job performance as job performance alone is not a significant predictor of vote choice.

The next step in our analysis is to compute the possible marginal relationship of knowing the governor's endorsement on vote choice. To help interpret the logit coefficients presented in the previous table, we calculated voting probabilities for Propositions 94–97 using Tomz et al.'s (2001) *CLARIFY* program for Stata (see also King et al. 2000). We generated these probabilities by changing the respondent's knowledge of Governor Schwarzenegger's endorsement holding all of the covariates at their median value. Figure 1 presents these calculations with 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1 shows that voters' knowledge of a cue interacted with their assessment of Governor Schwarzenegger has a strong relationship to their probability of supporting the four referendums. In fact, there is about a 30 percentage point discrepancy in support for the measures when we vary a voter's assessment of Governor Schwarzenegger while holding constant knowledge of his endorsement. Additionally, Figure 1 shows that this relationship holds for all four measures. Indeed, the point estimates and error bars are remarkably similar.

5 Conclusion

Our results show that voters use elite endorsements to make decisions in direct democracy. We also find, however, that usage of these endorsements is conditional on the assessment of the cue-giver. In our survey, voters used their evaluation of Governor Schwarzenegger's job performance to inform them about how to use his endorsement. That is, voters who gave the governor a positive job approval rating were likely to view his endorsement favorably, thus leading to

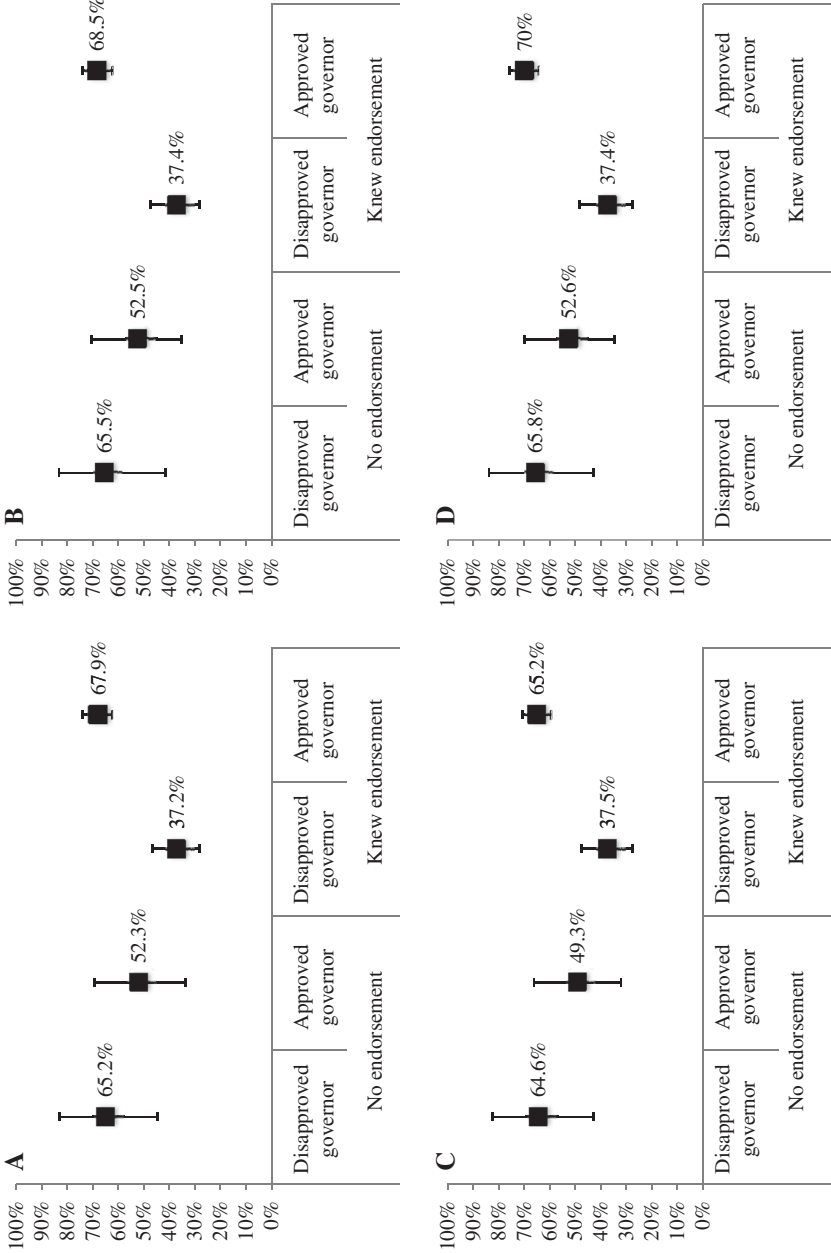


Figure 1: (A) Proposition 94 Predicted Probabilities. (B) Proposition 95 Predicted Probabilities. (C) Proposition 96 Predicted Probabilities. (D) Proposition 97 Predicted Probabilities.

greater support for the measures. By contrast, voters who both affixed a negative rating to the governor's job performance and were aware of his endorsement were significantly less likely to support the measures.

Similar to other focused election surveys (e.g., Lupia 1994), our data are not externally valid beyond our sample. It is possible that San Diego voters – who may have some experience with the Indian gaming establishments located in the county – were more knowledgeable about these referendums when compared with residents of other counties. We consider this possibility remote since most individuals do not pay close attention to policymaking at any level of government. While we would have preferred a statewide representative sample, such a study requires a prohibitive amount of resources for an exit survey. While our sample is imperfect, we expect that we would have seen similar results if we had polled voters in other California cities.

Despite our inability to claim strong external validity, we argue that our study's internal validity allows us to examine voting behavior on ballot measures where there is not much data available. In particular, our results help to bridge a gap in the literature: We found that governors *can* be persuasive cue-givers in a direct democracy election that dealt with complicated budgetary matters. We also add to the literature on endorsements, and, more specifically, to the limited literature that analyzes behavior outside of the laboratory. While our results are encouraging, unlike much of the voting behavior literature, we are cautious to claim that endorsements are a panacea for voters' information deficiencies. Given the recent empirical research that questions the effectiveness of endorsements in direct democracy elections (Burnett et al. 2010; Burnett and Parry 2012), we argue that additional research with varying electoral conditions is necessary to help scholars understand how often and when voters use elite endorsements.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Proposition 94

Summary:

“Yes” Vote approves, and “No” Vote rejects, a law that ratifies an amendment to existing gaming compact between the state and Pechanga Band of Luiseño Mission Indians. Fiscal Impact: Net increase in annual state revenues probably in the tens of millions of dollars, growing over time through 2030.

What Your Vote Means:

A YES vote on this measure means: The Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians – a tribe that owns a casino in Riverside County with about 2000 slot machines – could operate up to 7500 slot machines. The tribe would make increased payments to the state annually through 2030.

A NO vote on this measure means: The Pechanga tribe would be able to continue operating its existing casino, but would not be able to significantly expand its casino operations. The tribe’s current payments to the state would not be affected.

Proposition 95

Summary:

“Yes” Vote approves, and “No” Vote rejects, a law that ratifies an amendment to existing gaming compact between the state and Morongo Band of Mission Indians. Fiscal Impact: Net increase in annual state revenues probably in the tens of millions of dollars, growing over time through 2030.

What Your Vote Means:

A YES vote on this measure means: The Morongo Band of Mission Indians – a tribe that owns a casino in Riverside County with about 2000 slot machines –

could operate up to 7500 slot machines. The tribe would make increased payments to the state annually through 2030.

A NO vote on this measure means: The Morongo tribe would be able to continue operating its existing casino, but would not be able to significantly expand its casino operations. The tribe's current payments to the state would not be affected.

Proposition 96

Summary:

“Yes” Vote approves, and “No” Vote rejects, a law that ratifies an amendment to existing gaming compact between the state and Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation. Fiscal Impact: Net increase in annual state revenues probably in the tens of millions of dollars, growing over time through 2030.

What Your Vote Means:

A YES vote on this measure means: The Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation – a tribe that owns a casino in San Diego County with about 2000 slot machines – could operate up to 5000 slot machines. The tribe would make increased payments to the state annually through 2030.

A NO vote on this measure means: The Sycuan tribe would be able to continue operating its existing casino, but would not be able to significantly expand its casino operations. The tribe's current payments to the state would not be affected.

Proposition 97

Summary:

“Yes” Vote approves, and “No” Vote rejects, a law that ratifies an amendment to existing gaming compact between the state and Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. Fiscal Impact: Net increase in annual state revenues probably in the tens of millions of dollars, growing over time through 2030.

What Your Vote Means:

A YES vote on this measure means: The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians – a tribe that owns two casinos in Riverside County with about 2000 slot machines – could operate up to 5000 slot machines. The tribe would make increased payments to the state annually through 2030.

A NO vote on this measure means: The Agua Caliente tribe would be able to continue operating its existing casinos, but would not be able to significantly expand its casino operations. The tribe's current payments to the state would not be affected.

Appendix B

Gubernatorial Approval

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Arnold Schwarzenegger is handling his job as governor?

1. Approve
2. Disapprove
3. Do not Know

Votes on Gaming Referendums

How did you vote on Proposition 94?

How did you vote on Proposition 95?

How did you vote on Proposition 96?

How did you vote on Proposition 97?

For each question, respondents could indicate “Yes,” “No,” “Do not Know,” or “Did not Vote.”

Factual Knowledge Questions

Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97 do not require complete adherence to the California Environmental Quality Act.

1. True

2. False
3. Unsure/Do not Know

How many more slot machines would Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97 allow if they all succeed?

1. 25,000
2. 17,000
3. 11,000
4. 4000
5. Unsure/Do not Know

Governor Schwarzenegger's Endorsement

Do you know if Arnold Schwarzenegger supported, opposed or took no position on the Indian Gaming referendums (Propositions 94, 95, 96, and 97)?

1. Supported
2. No position
3. Opposed
4. Unsure/Do not Know

Party Identification

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat an Independent or what?

(If Republican or Democrat) Would you call yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not very strong (Republican/Democrat)?

(If Independent) Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic Party?

1. Strong Democrat
2. Weak Democrat
3. Independent-Democrat
4. Independent
5. Independent-Republican
6. Weak Republican
7. Strong Republican
8. Other _____

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